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Technical Decisions in Technical Hands

In the last few years the Defense Department has come to appreciate more fully the importance of science to military technology as well as the importance of putting technical decisions in technical hands. The Defense Reorganization Act of 1958 established the new position of Director of Defense Research and Engineering—a kind of vice-president in charge of science—with a salary at the same level as that commanded by the Assistant Secretaries for the Army, Navy, and Air Force. And the first man to occupy the new position, Herbert York, is a physicist who is equipped to understand first-hand a good proportion of the technical matters that come his way. York, unfortunately, suffered a heart attack a few weeks ago, and John Rubel of the Department has been named acting director while he is recovering, but this may be an appropriate time to review recent developments.

Expressed in terms of direct obligations, the portion of current spending for which the new office is responsible is well over \$5 billion. The main responsibility is to review all the technical programs initiated by the military departments, from basic research through the late development stage, which covers the very expensive construction and testing of prototypes of possible new weapons. Other responsibilities include an important advisory role in the procurement of weapons for actual operation and the authority to initiate, if there is a need, a certain number of scientific projects independently of the military departments.

The office of Director of Defense Research and Engineering is an upgraded version of the short-lived office of Assistant Secretary for Research and Engineering, which was established in 1957 by combining the earlier offices of the Assistant Secretary for Research and Development and the Assistant Secretary for Applications Engineering. The offices were combined to mediate differences between a scientific judgment centered in one office and an engineering judgment centered in the other, but the first man to hold the joint office was not a scientist, nor was he noted for his rapport with scientists. Difficulties concerning the extent of authority also arose shortly after the present office was established, but these were quickly settled. A dispute between York and the recently created Director of Guided Missiles was solved by dissolving the latter office, while a dispute with the Director of the Advanced Research Projects Agency was solved by bringing that agency under York's jurisdiction.

There is still in the Defense Department a vast structure of committees advising on technical questions, although its form is changing, but the major decisions coming from the new office are York's, based on his own grasp of the scientific issues involved. It is not surprising that York, as the maker of important decisions, has sometimes been criticized for placing his bets mistakenly. Thus George H. Mahon, chairman of the House Defense Appropriations subcommittee, said to him in the course of hearings this spring, "... there are those in industry and in Government who feel that you are placing a barricade before certain projects which they think are very important. I am sure that there are also those who feel that you are placing your stamp of approval on projects that are unsound. . ."

But at the House hearings, and the Senate appropriations' hearings too, York's performance in office, and as a witness, sat very well with his interrogators. And if scientists familiar with defense problems are disturbed by this or that technical decision, they can be greatly cheered by the general course of events—J.T.